

Note by LMB: I did this e-mail interview in February 2009 for the Russian magazine and website Mir Fantastiki <http://www.mirf.ru/> The interviewer was Dmitry no-last-name-given.

The magazine has a Wikipedia entry, for those who don't read Russian: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mir_Fantastiki

Russian Interview, February 2009

1. In Russia you are most famous by sci-fi cycle about Miles Vorkosigan, but recently you mostly work in fantasy genre. Do you find it very different writing science fiction as opposed to fantasy?

LMB: Not really. The mechanics of the writing—generating characters, constructing scenes and transitions, handling viewpoint and vocabulary, and so on—are exactly the same. World-building is world-building, and requires the same rigor in thinking through the implications of whatever novelties the story includes, whether one is working with technology or magic. There is a certain branch of so-called "high" fantasy, descending from the nineteenth-century works of William Morris which were in turn based on medieval romance, that has special demands of high-flown language and a quest for the numinous. But that's not the only possible style. Folk and fairy tale can be very low fantasy indeed, sometimes. For the *Sharing Knife* books, set in a loose analogue of frontier America and written in a deliberately rural Midwestern dialect, Morris's sort of noble language and dreamy vision would have been very inappropriate. The style must be fitted to the subject and mood of the story, not to mention the knowledge, vocabulary, and world-view of the viewpoint characters.

Believe me, I consider these issues for every sentence that hits my page. I can only hope that my translators take as much care.

2. As far as I know you've traveled very much in your life and changed several professions. Did this influence on your work as a writer?

LMB: Everything I've ever done, read, or learned has of course influenced my work, since writers make up their stories out of who they are and what they know—as if from the marrow of our bones. Certainly my experiences working in patient care in a major university hospital in my 20s have come out in both my SF and my fantasy—health care professional readers often thank me for getting the

medicine and biology right in my tales. Lately, with the *Sharing Knife* books, I've drawn on some very deep experiences indeed, from the more rural world of my childhood in the mid-twentieth-century American Midwest. (I talk about this in more detail in this speech, <http://www.dendarii.com/ohioana.html>)

3. You have visited Russia several years ago; what were your impressions of our country and peoples? Would you like to come here again?

LMB: My impressions were all too brief; I only spent a few days in St. Petersburg. I did get to see the gardens of the Summer Palace, and have a short morning in the Hermitage. It bemused me to realize that St. Petersburg is a younger city than Boston.

It was also borne in upon me that the United States did not invent multi-culturalism after all, and just how big and varied a country eleven time-zones wide really was.

I wrote up my impressions at the time—I begin to appreciate the value of journal-keeping: <http://www.dendarii.com/impressions.html> (I just went back and read it myself—I'm a little stunned by how much I'd forgotten.)

I'd like to come back someday, but not soon. I'm really burned out on travel just at the moment. In order to write, I really need to stay home for long, quiet stretches.

4. You have spoken about wars of future then, some time passed, so what is your opinion about this subject now?

LMB: Ah, that may be the most interesting question of this interview. At the time, I thought my hosts were crazy to be seriously asking a housewife from Ohio, who'd never even been in the military, her opinions on war, but I got up some kind of speech anyhow because I wanted the free trip to Russia. But there was a kernel of original thought in my speech that still niggles at me. I got to wondering, if we could eradicate a disease like smallpox, why couldn't we use the same medical and scientific methods to eradicate war?

Now, the scourge of smallpox was easy even as diseases go—among other things, it had a single, identifiable cause. And nobody

liked smallpox—it didn't boost anyone's bio-social status to have a plague the way people still imagine it does to have a war. It wasn't exciting, it didn't involve guys hitting each other or any of the fun stuff. Ugly death without glory. (Which is actually how real death in war also is, particularly for the non-combatants who get overrun, but the young male soldiers, hopped up on their own propaganda, often don't realize that till it's too late.)

Nobody seemed to be thinking about war in the general bio-evolutionary terms it would take to get to the real root causes, and therefore cures. They get all caught up in mere proximate causes and stop thinking altogether.

Group violence of course goes all the way back to our chimpanzee-like ancestors. I do think that, in the end, the chimpanzee studies are going to teach us more about our humanity than all the philosophers who ever wrote. The problem with philosophers is that really smart people are also good at fooling themselves. They have to be really clever to do so, and often are. With our simian cousins, all the camouflage of language is stripped away; what is laid bare may well be the truth.

Anyway, chimps have both hunting and war parties, and up through most of the hunter-gatherer stages of our evolution, that's what "war" was—family- and clan-based raiding parties. It seems to me that armies, which first put together larger-than-clan-based war groups, are to raiding what the invention of agriculture was to eating. They are a cultural invention that, once in place, gave the groups who took it up an unstoppable advantage over those who didn't. And so, like agriculture, the idea of armies spread.

You can actually see the echo of clan-based raiding in the training of platoons and such, which seeks to artificially mimic the bonds of kinship among the disparate men gathered. Armies work, to a degree, because they hijack human biological predilections that are already in place.

An anthropologist who studied primitive clan-based raiding in New Guinea came up with the fascinating statistic that such endemic raids actually killed more people over time, proportionally, than all the mechanized wars of the twentieth century. If true, it makes a certain mathematical sense—the more little polities there are, the more little local wars. So the invention of armies actually *reduced* warfare, from a demographic point of view, from once a summer to once a generation, perhaps another secret of their success.

This is about as far as my thinking has gone so far, although it also connects up with my notions about perceived status-emergencies as the root of much irrational human behavior. But it seems to me that if folks really started thinking about war as a biological phenomenon, they might get to a recipe for peace much faster than by thinking about particular wars as if they were really about what they pretended to be about.

5. As a sci-fi writer, how do you think how much technological progress will change our world in nearest future? And when humans will become race that could travel between planets and will meet intelligent aliens?

LMB: To answer the second part first, as more and more has been learned, in the past twenty years, about the precarious route evolution took to give rise to humanity on our own planet, I have less and less belief that intelligent life of any kind will be found elsewhere in the universe; we will be too separated by either deep space or deep time to make contact. Carbon-and-water-based life generally seems to arise from the fundamental parameters of chemistry, however, and may be more likely, for a pretty rare value of "likely" equal to "the right conditions plus billions of years of time and chance."

The economics and physics of interstellar travel would have to change radically for me to believe it could be part of our real future; at the moment, we can barely pay for orbital and near-planetary excursions with humans aboard. That said, the unmanned robotic planetary probes have been some of the best bang for the buck in space science ever. I'd like to see more of them.

I think technological progress will change our world at least as much in the next century as it did in the last, although not, I suspect, without setbacks. Fundamentalist and misogynistic religious groups seem the most scary hazard to me at the moment, although I grant a person doesn't have to be religious to be misogynistic, fearful, or stupid. Almost any made-up scheme will do to cloak or focus people's fears, or be a horse to ride for some sociopathic demagogue. The only answer seems to be education, education, and more education. I have some hope for the internet to be a vehicle of that education, but that depends on the good guys not tiring of explaining to ill-informed or paranoid people, over and over and over, how the world really works.

The line that Terry Pratchett uses in his Discworld novel *The Truth*, "A lie can run around the world before the truth can get its

boots on," has never been more true than in the age of the internet. Teaching people how to filter information, how to spot drivel or cooked statistics or illogic or all the crooked rhetorical devices, most of which are old enough to have Latin names but are still with us, is more important than ever. Granted, the internet gives us all plenty of *practice*.

In my idle moments, I speculate on humanity being the organ Gaia has evolved to protect herself from major asteroid impacts, but it's still to be seen whether we'll hold it together enough to do that.

We won't get just any future; only the one we're willing to work for and are able to pay for.

6. Does reality, contemporary wars or politic proceedings have influence on your works?

LMB: They inevitably leak through, much as I try to avoid them. I loathe politics, and I dislike polemical fiction that has as its ill-disguised purpose to push some political propaganda, even if it is close to its writer's heart. I am inspired by a lot of history, however, which I suppose was someone else's contemporary politics, now aged and dried enough not to hurt me to contemplate.

I have, of course, my own world-view, which colors everything I write, but I'm not writing to promulgate any particular agenda. Tolkien has a famous passage in which he describes the difference between allegory, which he cordially loathed, and applicability. "In one lies the freedom of the reader," he sums up, "and in the other the purposed domination of the writer." Should readers find my tales applicable—and it's clear that many do—I am of course interested in how, but it's hardly an effect under my control.

One of the things I like best about the romance genre, which I refer to in my WorldCon speech—<http://www.dendarii.com/denver08.html>—is how it so often puts the personal ahead of the political in its tales. What a *relief*.

7. If I'm not mistaken now you are writing new novel about Miles, what could we expect from this book? Was it hard for you to come back in Vorkosigan universe after several years that you spend writing other cycles?

LMB: Yes, as of this writing, I'm about halfway through a new Miles book for Baen (and, eventually, AST). It's running very late—it was supposedly due a couple of months ago, but even back when we signed the contract we knew that date might be a legal fiction. I hadn't counted on the big interruptions last year from my perforated appendix in May or my Worldcon Guest of Honor gig in August. Anyway, in the book so far, Miles is 39, and off on an Imperial Auditor investigation to a new planet, one that I just made up for this book (though I've had it in the back of my mind for years), so none of the fans have seen it before. So the general mode is mystery/thriller. I read the first few chapters at Worldcon in Denver.

Miles's voice came back to me very quickly. His body may have slowed a bit, but his mind is just as manic as ever. The book also has one new and one semi-new viewpoint character, a local boy named Jin and Armsman Roic, to keep things fresh for myself.

8. Unlike many modern authors of sci-fi and space operas you didn't use in your novels either alien races or artificial intelligence, but you introduced a lot of fictional technologies and races that are heirs of modern humanity. But why did you avoid some classic sci-fi stuff?

LMB: I feel I have an inordinate amount of classic sci-fi in the series as it stands—there's hardly room for more. For example, cheap and easy interstellar travel is a very dodgy old trope indeed. I think it's very unlikely to be a part of our real future. That's why, while such key elements in my stories as the biology and the medicine are serious futurism, I dub my general background a literary or psychological landscape, not a realistic one.

I made the decision very early on that there would be no intelligent aliens in Miles's universe. Rather, his future would go with bioengineering of different human species, so that ten thousand years down the timeline, the aliens would be us. In Miles's time we have already seen the first few entries in this contest—the quaddies, the Betan hermaphrodites, the Cetagandan haut, Taura and Guppy as one-offs, and so on. My most direct inspiration for this scheme comes from the wonderful classic SF stories of Cordwainer Smith. I'd like Miles to be Lord Jestocost when he grows up (a key character from the Smith story "The Ballad of Lost C'Mell," who has a passion for social justice).

The AI stuff is lacking since 1) I started the Miles series in 1982, when such things were less on the table, and 2) it doesn't much

interest me. The biology is more my thing. I do think a lot of AI/Singularity enthusiasts are weak on biology. After all, one of the not-so-secret hopes of the Singularity buffs is that it will defeat death, which is built into our biology. Naturally the two modes of thought are antagonistic. (Singularity and AI buffs also tend to be weak on the realities of child-rearing, but that's another rant.)

9. Within the framework of sci-fi cycle you manage to write detectives, romantic stories, humoristic ones... What was the reason for such changes in style of your novels?

LMB: I like them. If I'm not writing what I like, there's scarcely any point to the effort. I sometimes think of my work as a smorgasbord made up of all my favorite desserts.

10. In many sci-fi and space opera worlds ("Star Wars," "Dune," "Warhammer 40000") we see planet or whole humanity, ruled by some kind of monarch or tyrant and most democratic governments (if they exists at all) are weak and corrupted. Monarchs rule at both Barrayar and Cetaganda. So does reborn of feudalism almost inevitable in future, when we will colonize other planets?

LMB: Well, I'm not at all convinced we're going to colonize other planets any time soon.

As for the prevalence of feudalism and other archaic governments in SF, I think that's more driven by narrative constraints. It's *hard* to write a dramatically satisfying story about democracy in action, which is basically an argument that goes on forever and never resolves, and has *far* too many characters to keep track of.

In the *Sharing Knife* tetology I gave my heroes Dag and Fawn a realistic and serious demographic problem to grapple with, and it *really* didn't want to fit into the expected narrative pattern of a fantasy epic (which is all too often a war story) at all. Waging peace is not like waging war, and democracy is all about waging peace.

As a governmental form, democracy does seem to be pretty successful at the moment; I don't think anyone is going to be able to make it go away again, except in brief local tyrannies. Clever sociopaths will always be with us, though, trying to game the system, so as long as they exist, we'll need laws and law enforcement.

The other thing about kings and kingdoms, etc., is that they mimic human family relations, so readers connect with the characters in such tales on an unconscious biological level—the king stands in for the father, the queen for the mother (why so often dead? as a mother, this worries me), the prince or princess for the son or daughter about to learn something about the world. Fairy and folk tales use these character types as well for their moral fables, when they aren't using the miller's third son or something.

There's also the young/disempowered male power fantasy thing going on in these stories, which I expect will always be around. Overthrow the father-figure, yeah. See Joseph Campbell and *The Hero With a Thousand Imitators*.

11. In Russia "Vorkosigan Saga" sometimes called a sci-fi version of "Horatio Hornblower series," what do you think about such simile? Were books of Cecil Scott Forester among your inspirations then you started your cycle?

LMB: Yes, I read the Hornblower books back in high school. They were certainly a structural model for me about how to write a satisfying series—a string of stand-alone adventures that, together, made up a biographical arc. Now, mind, you, when I started my series, I didn't know it was going to *be* a series—it was all I could do to get to the end of the book I was writing at the time.

Which is still true, come to think.

12. It is well known that culture of Barrayar is to a certain extent based on Russia. What motivated you to create a fantasy novel about Russia? Was it hard for you to write about country that you've never visited (if I'm not mistaken) and did you make some special cultural or historical researches about Russia before you start writing this book?

LMB: Well, it wasn't as if I was writing an historical novel set in the real Russia. My supposed twenty-third century Russians were merely one of four demographic and language groups who made up the early colonists of Barrayar. "Modern" Barrayarans, in Miles's time, are no more Russian than I am Scottish. (Hey, but I know my clan plaid. It's... really eye-searing.) That said, when I started writing *Shards of Honor* I had already read a certain amount about Russian history and culture (and have since learned more). I did have one Russian literature

course in college, where I would have been permanently scarred by *Oblamov*, if I'd finished reading it. But Meiji Japan was as much of an influence, with its cultural pattern of being forcibly opened from the outside, as were many other historical details taken from all over the world.

13. Often when one became older he or she often changes his attitude to life and other peoples and so on... How much have you and your writing style changed since you write your first book? If you start writing now, would your books be different ideologically or philosophically?

LMB: Well, if I started today, at age fifty-nine, my books would be poorer by the lack of 27 years of writing experience and learning-by-doing. But in a sense, every time I start a new book I'm starting all over again (usually, at the working-it-up-in-notes stage, with a certain amount of secret wailing, "I've forgotten how to write!") I know more things than I knew when I was thirty-two, yet have forgotten others; I'm not sure if I'm staying ahead. My underlying thematic concerns change year by year, and always have, but that is an on-going, gradual process.

So folks get to see for themselves exactly how my books are different as I age, because, well, there they all are, standing in a row ready for comparison. (The original copyright dates are usually found on the back of the title page.) Go read.